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CHESTER AND BILLY GO TO THE MOON

Ann Stotts

I.

I'm worried about Billy. He can't even talk to me. He's just lying on the bed with his eyes squeezed tight and slowly shoving a Butterfinger into his mouth. Who knows what happened this time. I guess I'll just have to wait until he gives me some kind of sign. I wish this room was prettier. Then maybe Billy would laugh again and dance around the room and make his belly shake.

Pretty, spell it p-r-e-t-t-y. It's one of the first big words that Billy taught me. Sometimes Billy reads out loud to me for hours. It's why I know so much. The room I used to live in was pretty, with an ocean full of toys. The ocean is bigger than the sea. I know that, too.

"Hear them?" he finally says, propping his moon face up on his pillow, the one with the green and purple tigers on it that I like so much. "Next he's going to tell her that he doesn't know when he's going to be home. See? How stupid! I hope he doesn't come back at all this time. Cause you know he doesn't even care that I'm up here and that I'm going to be left all alone with her. He just doesn't care. Can't you hear them?"

And he sent the green and purple tigers crashing to the floor.

Then Billy leaned down closer to me and murmured straight into my ear.

"Never mind," he said, "it doesn't really matter. You want to know something, though? Roger Cravey," he said in a rushed whisper, "he told me that Steve Hathaway's mom told his mom that my mom's an alcoholic. And now I bet everybody knows!"

Alcoholic. Hmmm. That's a pretty big one. Billy should know better than to tell me such a quite big word. I wonder what it means?

But Billy was no help. He just sunk into the mattress and went back to his Butterfinger. And left me listening for the voices downstairs.

II.

The voice was getting louder and louder, and finally it was past the stairs and up to the room. It was her voice, but she didn't sound like she usually does when I hear her crying during the day in the next room or screaming at him at night. I think she was singing a melody, but she was crying at the same time so that it turned into a kind of muttering wail. Then she opened the door and I had to look at her.

Sometimes I watch TV when Billy's gone. He has this dresser that's missing a bottom drawer, and on it is a white TV that Billy will sometimes keep on for me while he's gone. Of course he turns a knob so that no noises come from it, but it lets me see women in swishing dresses and a big yellow bird and lots of things. And sometimes I see women who look kinda like her, except that they dress real pretty and smile, even when they're scrubbing the floor.

Anyway, she sure didn't look like them today. Her legs still looked kinda like theirs, but they were sticking out of this smooth-looking pink dress that only came down to her skinny hips. And over this she had on a big straight shirt and on her feet she was wearing gym shoes, just like Billy's but a lot bigger. Her black hair was kinda wild, like she'd slept on it and just gotten right up. And her face was pure white, except for the black smudges under her puffy eyes.

I'm sure you've got someone like her at your house. But does yours walk into a room and sit right down on a pair of dirty jeans on the floor and not even notice them? Well, that's what she did. She was still singing that funny melody, and drinking something out of this clear bottle. Every time she took a swallow it seemed to take a lot out of her, and her whole little body would kinda sigh.

She stopped crying finally, and for a long time she just sat still on the carpet and stared at the wall. Then her face looked like it just remembered something, and she went up to the dresser and seized the picture on it. It was a photograph of him and her getting ready to feed each other a piece of cake. She started crying again, harder this time, and her face got more black smudges on it. Then she sorta hugged the picture up to her chest, and before I knew it she went to sleep right on the carpet.

Pretty soon I heard more noises on the staircase. But these were more like tiptoes. I hoped it wasn't who I thought it was. You know who I thought it was, don't you? Gee you're smart, spell you s-m-a-r-t.

Billy's pudgy little body entered the room and he looked like he'd just broken a toy or something even worse.

"Mom, what are you doing?" he shrieked.

It took her a minute to realize Billy was there, and then her body tried to gather itself up real quick. But it was too much effort, and her face just collapsed into her lap.

She tried to pull Billy to her, but he just stood there with that broken-toy look again.

"Oh honey, I'm sorry," she mumbled. "Mommy's really really sorry."

But Billy's little body had already waddled itself straight out of the room.

III.

"You know Chester," Billy said next morning, "I don't want to go to school today. I really don't. But if I don't go I'll have to stay home, and I don't want to stay here either. You think we could just go away somewhere?"

Billy's big brown eyes were pleading with me, but I just couldn't answer him.

"If I do go to school I'm going to have to go to the bus stop," he continued, "and I didn't want to tell you, but yesterday morning something happened there."

He got the something out after a few gulps.

"Mike and Sean, they called me a fat tubalard, and then they started hitting me with snowballs," he confided. "And by the time I ran away I was all wet and cold and I had to walk to school. I couldn't go back there and then I was late and oh I just don't know what to do anymore!"

I think Billy was a little embarrassed to have told me so much. From what he's told me of Mike and Sean, I think they look just like these hairy monsters that I sometimes see chase people on the TV. No wonder Billy runs away from them.

But I know he was embarrassed anyway, because he crept under the covers with his comic book and wouldn't talk to me for the rest of the day.

IV.

That night, he, the one with the sagging belly and polyester pants, came in the room. I forgot to mention it, but he comes in every night that he's home. He has Billy on this diet, and at bedtime Billy has to get on the scale and see if he's lost even one pound. Those Mike and Sean monsters aren't the only ones who call Billy fat.

Billy doesn't tell anyone but me, but he hates to get on that scale. He tells me that it makes him feel ashamed. I'm not sure what that means, but I do know that every day when Billy is gone I wish three times for that yellow monster to disappear.

I heard the voices arguing before he came upstairs tonight.

"I'm only trying to help him," he said. "It's more than you can say that you do."

"All I can see," she said, "is that you're making him feel like more of a failure than he is. You have a way of doing that."

"Billy's not as sensitive as you think he is," he said, and the voice was louder. "It's time that he toughened up a little."

"I don't know," she said, "I just don't know anymore."

And I heard one of them snap open a can.

Anyhow, he stomped in the room and made Billy get on that thing. Anyone could see that Billy was terrified. That dumb plea in Billy's eyes should have told him. But all his eyes did were accuse Billy when he saw the number was the same. Just like it was always the same. And just like Billy always stared at the ceiling and blinked back his tears when he left.

V.

"Chester," Billy said, "do you think maybe we could go to the moon?" I found out that a lot of fat little boys live on the moon. Everybody's fat there! And you know what? They don't let any grown-ups there at all."

And his curly locks emphasized the "any."

"You want to know where I heard it?" A fairy told me when I was sleeping. Oh Chester, we're going to be happy, we're really going to be happy ever after!"

And he nearly danced off to the bus stop.

I heard him slam the door after her, telling her not to come back and that he'd raise his son to be a little man on his own.

But I knew she'd be back. I knew all of them so well.

Then he came in the room.

"It's that damned panda bear!" he bellowed. "It's the first thing that's got to go!"

And he pounced on me and I soared out to a room with the bluest ceiling and now I've dropped into stinking darkness. Something sharp has just sliced into me.

My left paw is completely gone now. I'm writing this with my right one. I don't know who you are, but do you think that maybe you could look after Billy? I'm not sure how he's going to get there without me.